

Fear and awe in a time of a pandemic

Morning RH 2020

Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

Alright, this will likely be a first for you. I am going to mention Satan on this bimah. I know we don't normally talk about him but the Hebrew word for Satan is שָׂטָן and in our rabbinical tradition, it is a force that tries to prevent one from doing God's will or can urge God to test a person.

Anyways, one bright, beautiful Shabbat morning, everyone in tiny Kodeshville wakes up early and goes to shul. Before the service starts, the townspeople sit in their pews and talk about their lives, their families, and the rabbi's new haircut. Suddenly, on the bimah, Satan appears!

Everyone starts screaming and running for the front entrance, trampling each other in their determined efforts to get away from Evil Incarnate.

Soon, everyone is evacuated from the synagogue except for one man, who sits calmly in his pew, seemingly oblivious to the fact that God's adversary is in his presence.

This confuses Satan a bit. Satan walks up to the man and says, "Hey, don't you know who I am?" The man says, "Yep, sure do."

Satan says, "Well, aren't you afraid of me?" The man replies, "Nope, sure ain't."

Satan, perturbed, says, "And why aren't you afraid of me?"

Looking directly at Satan, he answers, "Well, I've been married to your sister for 25 years."¹

Most Jews today don't fear or even believe in Satan, including me. But we can relate to things we are afraid of and things that we are not, based on who we are and the life we are living. I hope you don't have a little or big Satan in your home. Even if you do, there are many other things to be fearful of. Some of us are afraid of heights, flying, spiders, or snakes. And then there are others would readily jump out of a plane or go camping in the wilderness. Meshuggenah! How many of you have done that? I seem to remember seeing pictures of Hallie Berman on Facebook skydiving for her birthday. It must have been exhilarating! There are people who avoid all non-organic food and keep a strict diet in hopes of avoiding cancer. And some have never let their children play outside unsupervised out of fear of kidnappers. We

can worry about driving at night, walking alone, and even of the dark. There are no limits to the things that we can potentially be afraid of.

Unfortunately, fear has reached epic heights this past year with the spread of Covid 19. Many are scared that they or a loved one will contract it, get terribly ill, and even die. We have shut down schools, restaurants, sports, museums, libraries, and work offices. We don protective masks and have invested in hand sanitation and disinfectant cleaning supplies. Hugging and hand shaking are big no nos. There are many who don't see friends or even their own grandchildren. We now have soaring unemployment where people are struggling to pay their rent, mortgage, and put food on the table. Kids are out of the classroom. And many are isolated, depressed, and lonely.

Is our societies' reaction to the virus in proportion with the threat that it carries? I'm sure you all have different views on that. According to the Centers for Disease Control, as of September 14, we have 179,630 dead in our country² and various other sites report well over 900,000 dead in the world. The Spanish Flu of 1918, according to CDC, lists 675,000 US deaths and 50 million worldwide. The Bubonic plague of the Middle ages is believed to have killed 20 million people, wiping out a third of the population of Europe.

Even though the Spanish Flu and Bubonic plague were far more catastrophic than our Covid 19, I believe we must take protective measures to safe guard those who are most vulnerable to this disease and use the best science of medicine to guide us. Like you, I can hardly wait for an effective vaccine to be ready or at least high quality therapeutics. I am also highly critical of our governmental response to this from the very beginning and even now. But, but, this is not what I want to speak about because I don't have any control over the pace of biotech breakthroughs or the actions of our government.

Instead, I want to delve into something that we do have control over and it is ourselves. I find myself very worried about the epidemic of fear that has spiraled out of control. When I talk with people, I see that those who watch the network news daily are increasingly in a heightened agitated state. They are constantly worked up and stressed out. The problem of network and cable news is that it runs 24/7 and is designed to provoke high emotions that you keep tuning in and don't want to miss anything. I worry about what that does to a person.

Fear and anxiety may lead one to barricade himself in the home without access to exercise, healthy meals, and friends. Social isolation, decreased access to community, economic stress and easy access to firearms will likely increase the number of suicides in our country. We are already hearing of increased use of opioids, drugs and alcohol abuse. Furthermore, not

everyone lives in a peaceful home environment. There are concerns about unreported child and domestic abuse and violence. And even if we are one of the lucky ones, we are still stressed out and not sleeping well. I'm worried not just about the virus itself. Dayenu! That enough to be sure but I am also very worried about the long lasting impact of fear on us, our health, and the future of our children and households.

In the Wall Street Journal on Aug. 4, associate professor at UCLA's school of medicine, Dr. Ladapo writes, that at the beginning of the pandemic we were united in the "goals of preventing hospitals from being overwhelmed and buying scientists time to develop therapies. But as those goals were accomplished, fear stoked by the press gave birth to the dogma that preventing Covid-19 cases isn't an issue only of health but of morality-even if prevention comes at the cost of livelihoods and futures, or increases in poverty and domestic violence, or sacrifices children's educational and emotional wellbeing."

Dr. Ladapo advocates for rational approach to the virus that focuses on limiting its main ways of transmission, protecting vulnerable adults, developing effective therapies, producing more personal protective equipment, communicating accurate information on mortality risk, and increasing access to rapid testing. The main pathway forward, according to Dr. Ladapo, is to empower people so their fear doesn't get the best of them and "Communicating the role of good nutrition, exercise and stress reduction-as facilitators of immune function would also increase personal empowerment and reduce fear."³

Dr Ladapo words on empowerment resonated with me because fear can be paralyzing and lead to deep depression. How can one take control over their health and wellbeing? Well, back in May, I was on a rabbi's session in the spring that dealt with the science of fear.

Dr. Joseph LeDoux, Center for Neural Science, NYU, interestingly made a distinction between fear and anxiety. He said fear is when there is a threat that is present and harm is imminent. Some examples of this would be an attacker coming at us wielding a knife, a car careening in front of us, or a menacing dog barking and leaping towards us. Anxiety, on the other hand, doesn't necessary coincide with any imminent threat and may never even come to fruition. My worry about my children and their future, my upcoming foot surgery, the wellbeing of our congregation would be examples of general worry. My anxieties may very well be legitimate but they may also be overblown. Is your response to Covid 19 in the category of fear where you believe death or severe illness is imminent or is it generalized anxiety?

Dr. LeDoux stated that fear and anxiety are normal healthy processes but they become a problem when they interfere with our daily life and wellbeing. Since I mentioned Satan at the

beginning of this sermon, I want to be the devil's advocate and to state that all our existences have been majorly disrupted. None of us are feeling great about our lives and society. Whatever it is that we are feeling, our lives have been absolutely interfered with. But to argue against Satan, I see that some are coping better than others. Some are still finding ways to stay sane and connected. So what can help us stay grounded and emotionally healthy?

Dr. Michelle "Lani" Shiota, Arizona State University, advocates for us to be aware that how we interpret or appraise events are not necessarily based on actual stimuli. Maybe an example of this could be that it's cold outside and our stubborn child won't wear a jacket. Now our fear that he will get sick from the cold may not be based on the weather or even how cold viruses are caught. Dr. Shiota says rather our emotions are provoked by how we interrupt events. Our responses can come about from immediate danger and other reactions that we have learned from our culture and experience. Looking at Covid 19, one could give in to the fear that the virus is everywhere, that it could kill me or my loved ones, and that I am helpless. Whether our fear is justified or not, there are other approaches. She counsels, "There is nothing wrong with being frightened, especially right now. When we are overwhelmed with fear, we do have alternatives. Awe can be one alternative. We can seek out stimuli or even finding awe in the situation itself can help us create mental and emotional space by calming, centering, and making peace with uncertainty, and allow us time to gather information and move forward."

With adjusting our perspective and attitude, we have the ability to taper down the fear and increase the quality of our life. Dr. Shiota suggests that we strive for awe in this unique time in our history because it is a more empowering emotional state and can increase our sense of spirituality and interconnectedness with other living beings.

There's a lot about awe in Judaism. Rabbi Geoff Mitelman gave some examples of awe in our Jewish texts. The Hebrew word for awe is *Yirah* and is at times also translated as fear or reverence.

In Psalm 112:1

תִּלְלוּ יְהוָה | אֲשֶׁר־יֵאֵשׁ יְרָא אֶת־יְהוָה בְּמִצְוֹתָיו תִּפְיץ מְאֹד:

Hallelujah. Happy is the man who fears Adonai, who is ardently devoted to His commandments.

In Ecclesiastes 12:3

סוּף דְּבַר הַכֹּל נִשְׁמָע אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים יְרָא וְאֶת־מִצְוֹתָיו שְׁמֹר כִּי־נָה כָּל־הָאָדָם:

The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere God and observe His commandments! For this applies to every person.

What an interesting word, *Yirah* is. It has powerful connotations with it because it rides the line between fear and awe. Rabbi Mitelman and Dr. Shiota make an interesting distinction between these two. They said that when one is in a state of fear, her perspective and vision shrinks. We become singularly focused on the threat. Our heart beats faster, our minds race, and we don't see anything but the threat ahead. On the other hand, awe expands or broadens our perspective. We are no longer focused on one thing but can take in more around us through our senses, thoughts, and emotions. It is in awe that life is most profound.

Abraham Joshua Heschel in God in Search of Man, writes that awe, “is a way of understanding. Awe is itself an act of insight into a meaning greater than ourselves.”⁵ He continues, “The meaning of awe is to realize that life takes place under wide horizons, horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation, a generation, or an era. Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal.”⁶

When have you experienced awe? Was it when you looked out over the ocean, sat with a friend, pet your dog, marveled over the beauty of a flower, looked into the eyes of a loved one, or peered up at the changing sky? When we still the fear and focus on life, creation, and the world around, we can feel a connection that radiates beyond ourselves. We are more than bodies at risk of infection. We are more than the sum of our worries. There is a spark, a soul, an ability to sense beyond this moment that we are part of something far greater than ourselves. We are able to think, reflect, and wonder about our place in this vast universe. Can you even calculate all the people you have influenced over the years through social, work, and family encounters? Look at the tiniest of creatures from the ants scrambling beneath our feet, to the hawks soaring above. It's incredible to notice the amazing diversity of plants even in our own neighborhoods. There are differing shapes of leaves, colors of flowers, texture to the stems. Even my own cat's fur feels different at times. It is right now very, very supple because he like other pets have glorified having people around and nonstop petting.

The Psalmist wrote in the Bible,

יְרֵאָתָּהּ חֵכְמָה וְיִרְאָתָּהּ יְהוָה יִשְׁכַּל טוֹב לְכָל-עֹשֵׂיהֶם תְּהִלָּתוֹ עֲמֹדַת לְעֵד:

The beginning of wisdom is the awe/fear of Adonai; all who practice it gain sound understanding. Praise is everlasting.⁷

Wisdom comes from having a sense of *Yirah* because we catch a glimpse beyond our current turmoil, beyond our current predicament, into the vast of ocean of existence. Having *Yirah* doesn't entail risky behavior or life threatening actions. One can still don a mask, wash hands, and still reach out into the world around us. We can choose to shut off our screens, take a shabbes away from the news and social media, and instead walk around our neighborhood. We can call and reach out to people we care about. We can choose to live in the best ways we can imagine even with clouds of Covid hanging over us.

And perhaps this is a time to remind of ourselves of the wisdom of the Serenity prayer. God, grant me the **serenity** to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. For those things we do not have control over, let's focus instead of why we live, what we are part of, and the glorious nature of existence. How lucky we are to be alive. How blessed we are to have people in our lives that we cherish. With this kind of faith, even **יְהוָה** himself, won't scare us as we remain committed to living and loving fully.

Notes:

1 Joke adapted from : <http://www.jokebuddha.com/Afraid#ixzz6UB7Cgf1s>

2 <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/covid19/index.htm>

3 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/fear-and-loathing-in-covid-america-11596470084>

4 The Science of Yirah: How “Fear” Contracts Our Vision, and “Awe” Expands It with With Rabbi Geoffrey A. Mitelman, Founding Director of Sinai and Synapses; Joseph LeDoux Ph.D., Center for Neural Science, NYU; and Michelle "Lani" Shiota Ph.D, Arizona State University

5 Abraham Joshua Heschel in God in Search of Man pg. 74

6 “ “ pg. 75

7 Ps. 111:10